
Jeffrey Herlihy-Mera, *After American Studies:
Rethinking the Legacies of Transnational Exceptionalism*

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- 1 Jeffrey Herlihy-Mera, *After American Studies: Rethinking the Legacies of Transnational Exceptionalism*
- 2 Routledge, 2019. Pp. 198. ISBN 9780367887100
- 3 Andrea Righi, Miami University
- 4 *After American Studies: Rethinking the Legacies of Transnational Exceptionalism* by Jeffrey Herlihy-Mera is a frank and courageous anti-imperialist book that deploys a vast array of case studies to unmask the many (and toxic) nationalist principles that found the idea of the United States of America from its inception to the erosion of its hegemonic position in the globalized economy of the 21st century. The text is a very enjoyable theoretical and empirical inquiry and should be adopted not only in Universities but also in high schools—the sections that chronicle how “innocuous” cultural institutions enact a patriotism that hides the imperialist agenda of the country are informative and suitable for a vast readership.
- 5 Using the lenses of theory and criticism, the first part of the book engages in a spirited discussion of the various devices (textual, economic, geopolitical, and politico-institutional) that activate and operate the mechanism of the patria as an aggregation of heterogeneous groups based on conquest and repression. Here, Herlihy-Mera studies how the state manages real and symbolic spaces via the proliferation of collective rituals. He also takes a hard look at how humanistic disciplines are not immune from the neoliberal logic that encompasses U.S. policy, as the ever-growing fad for new hyphenated terms (more on that below) leave untarnished the core of U.S. exceptionalism and frontier mentality. Conversely, Herlihy-Mera argues that what is truly “American” in American studies is the geography of oppression that subjugates people and solicits prescribed expressions of individual experiences. Hence the task that *After American Studies* sets up for itself: a titanic work of deconstruction of all the

political, economic, religious, social, legal, artistic, and linguistic elements that create the many sites of affirmation for national (and thus nationalistic, the author implies) identifications.

- 6 Herlihy-Mera does not shy away from confronting the ineffectiveness of the correctives that trans-American studies implemented, particularly the emphasis on "diversity" that corporate universities wield as the magic wand to solve problems that are structural and have economic roots. According to Herlihy-Mera, the largely perfunctory role of the catch-word diversity turns predatory with the usage of hyphenation. Terms like Native-American or Mexican-American exploit the supposed diversity of the ethnic descriptor by subjecting it to the American name that follows. This is how Herlihy-Mera summarizes the point: "distinctions are often expressed linguistically through hyphenation, which resonates as codified subservience ... As a result of these colonized notions of difference, there can be no common universality (a cross-group equality)" (44).
- 7 The second part of the book concentrates on literature as a crucial form of legitimation for national identity. The case of Azar Nafisi Reading *Lolita* in Teheran (2003) is significant in this context as it illustrates how such novels craft a congenial image of "difference" for the American audience while also offering justifications for future military interventions in the name of democracy. The author also discusses earlier literary cases, reaching back to the construction of the American Adam (Willa Cather, Fenimore Cooper) as well as other canonical authors such as Mark Twain, Ernst Hemingway, and Jack Kerouac.
- 8 While Herlihy-Mera is an expert Hemingway scholar, his willingness to challenge the nativist fantasies of this writer is remarkable. He exposes Hemingway's nostalgic representation of Michigan as an empty space of wilderness and freedom that ignores earlier inhabitants and the assault on their land rights they suffered only a few decades earlier. Naturally, in Hemingway, one also finds a subversive vein, and this is where the book begins to pivot toward a post-national idea of co-belonging. For instance, Herlihy-Mera dedicates several pages interrogating the supposed Americanness of Cormac McCarthy, particularly *All the Pretty Horses*, the first novel of his Border Trilogy, providing a detailed series of extratextual insights that highlight the importance of Mexican culture for the creation of the protagonist, John Grady Cole. This analysis relies on a meticulous empirical approach that sifts through a throve of historical and geographic data regarding the location where part of the trilogy takes place, the San Angelo area. Combined with textual cues regarding the frequent use of Spanish, this precious reconstruction calls into question the hyper-white image of John Grady Cole as the romantic cowboy shedding a more hybrid and nuanced light on this figure.
- 9 Herlihy-Mera's discussion of public and monumental art is of interest as well. Among the many examples he provides, I refer the reader to the paradigmatic case of Deadwood, South Dakota, where the discovery of a corpse of a supposed pioneer threw authorities (and the media) into a frenzy of forensic investigations and archeological initiatives. (This a classic example of how neoliberalism has colonized the humanities: archeology is now merely a subsidiary of the entertainment industry and opportunity for territorial marketing.) The ground-breaking discovery in Deadwood propelled expensive reconstructions of the Wild West life and mythology. Meanwhile, in the same area, the remains of another person, a native American of the same period, were

discovered and given a proper burial by the local Sioux tribe without anybody noticing it.

- 10 *After American Studies* offers incursions in ethnography, providing a well-researched and much-needed reflection on the dark side of the international facade of the U.S. academia, where blatant discriminations against non-European visitors requesting B1/2 Visas to attend conferences are ignored, or worst tacitly accepted. In this sense, the citadel of free thought of the university is much more lenient toward Trumpism than what it likes to admit. Through veritable fieldwork, Herlihy-Mera sifts through testimonies of scholars and professors from Latin America, former immigration agents showing how decisions that determine people's careers are based on racial profiling and crass stereotypes—which are unsurprisingly the foundations of American imperialism. In the end, Herlihy-Mera calls for new ways of thinking about collective agency and communitarian action by building on the work of authors like Jack/Judith Halberstam, Jodi Melamed, and Monisha Das Gupta, among others. Confronted with the horror and wholesale bankruptcy of the nation-state, he asks of the reader to entertain the possibility of a true global solidarity that overcomes the nation and its mythologies.